

Strengthening American Communities Act (S. 686)

Aspiring Public Servants Deserve a Pathway to Service in America's Local Communities

Senator Ben Cardin

No individual willing to serve their community as a law enforcement officer, public health practitioner, social worker, educator, public safety official or in any other public service field should be held back from committing to public service due to the high cost of obtaining a college education. Every city, town, and rural community in the United States relies on individuals who utilize their talents for the betterment of others while accepting lower paying public service careers. Far too many individuals who are drawn to public service do not choose to enter into public service careers or are forced to leave due to the high cost of obtaining their college educations.

Rather than require public servants to take on student debt to obtain their college education, students should receive a debt-free undergraduate education in exchange for a commit to public service. Without financial barriers to accessing a college education, we can ensure that our communities are served by a highly diverse, qualified, and representative workforce. The **Strengthening American Communities Act** provides students with pathways to earn an undergraduate degree, debt-free, in exchange for a commitment to public service upon completion of their degree. Through a partnership between the federal government, states, and institutions of higher education to provide the cost of attendance for students at both two-year and four-year institutions, our nation's public servants will have the opportunity to earn a quality education debt-free while our local communities will meet their workforce needs.

Under the **Strengthening American Communities Act**, a student will be able to obtain an undergraduate degree debt-free in exchange for a commitment to public service upon completion of their degree. This legislation:

- Creates a new partnership between the federal government and states and Indian tribes to help them waive resident tuition and fees for two years of community college programs for eligible students, while promoting key reforms to accelerate student success;
- Provides a federal match of \$3 for every \$1 invested by the state to waive community college tuition and fees for eligible students before other financial aid is applied;
- Constructs a Pathways for Student Success for eligible students to have the actual cost of tuition and fees waived at minority-serving institutions that work towards improving student outcomes;
- Establishes a federal National Public Service Education Grant to cover the average cost of in-state tuition, fees, and room and board for two years so a student may attend debt-free at a four year institution;
- Provides students attending minority serving institutions with the actual cost for tuition, fees, and room and board for two years;
- Holds students accountable to ensure their continued academic success and completion a minimum of three year public service requirement upon graduation;
- Maintains oversight of participating institutions and certify the institutions maintain pathways to service for enrolled students; and
- Creates the Debt-Free Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program, an accelerated Public Service Loan Forgiveness program, to provide more immediate student loan relief for hard working public servants.

As a 'first dollar' program, this support does not impact students' eligibility for other forms of institutional, state and federal financial aid, which will provide for the additional costs of attendance such as room and board, books, supplies, personal expenses, and transportation to ensure students are able to graduate debt-free depending on the student's demonstrated financial need.

For more information or to cosponsor, contact Mike Thomas at mike_thomas@cardin.senate.gov.